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The Dangers of Intellectual Honesty in a World of Lies: A Reply to Lee Basham

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6DJ>.

Lee Basham's recent piece "An Autopsy of the Origins of HIV/AIDS" (2022) has some astonishingly provocative subject matter, so much as to overcome the force of his overall argument. He makes a true point: investigation into real scientific and medical practice may reveal truths that are politically and morally upsetting, but such difficulty is not sufficient reason to turn away from those truths.

My argument against his purpose is fundamentally practical, but no less universal: that too many of our populations are unable to understand this truth. In such circumstances as ours, our priority as educators and researchers must be to organize to improve public education in two important subject areas. First, the basic practical scientific knowledge of our populations must improve. Also essential, the public must gain sufficient media literacy to tell truth from falsehood, misinformation from lies, and the will to inform from the will to propagandize. Necessary for all of this is that people genuinely prioritize the search for the truth of matters in public discourse above partisan interests, grifting, and bullying entertainment.

This article will use Basham's own core example to describe and argue that social epistemologists should take up this larger mission. Given our position as a discipline for the study of the social aspects of knowledge, we as social epistemologists have a more demanding professional responsibility than merely raising alternative narratives and having provocative conversations. In a time when all knowledge can be weaponized as propaganda, we have a professional duty to educate and improve the knowledge skills of the public.

### **Serious As a Plague: HIV, COVID, and the Truth**

If there can be a crime against humanity equivalent to manslaughter or negligent homicide, it would be a crime of accident that impacted entire populations. The Chernobyl incident, Union Carbide's gas leak in Bhopal, or the many acts of environmental racism that build heavily polluting facilities in poor, racialized communities may be examples. If Edward Hooper is correct, and HIV had developed in the Koprowski oral polio vaccine, then *The River* uncovered yet another.

If this is the case, and we can bring ourselves to admit it, what should be done? That there is any moral responsibility at all demands our response to this question.

Since action must follow from this conclusion, our responsibility poses a follow-up question. Given what should be done, *what can we do now* to achieve it? Because it is not enough simply to raise the question on a venue like SERRC without also thinking of these practical concerns.

We must also now consider our own actions in terms of how even the basic matter of "just raising questions" has been weaponized by extremists to launder into mainstream media racist and misogynist propaganda, as well as [calls for mass violence](#) against socialists, liberals, and minority rights activists. It is not enough for us, as researchers and intellectuals, to raise

controversial and dangerous questions and deny responsibility for when others use our speech to manipulate others in dangerous ways.

Someone could share Basham's article on Telegram channels that promote anti-vaccination propaganda, and guide conversations about it to make people further distrust any vaccines. If a parent's conversation about that article solidifies an anti-vaccination belief such that they refuse all vaccinations for their children, not only against COVID, but also chickenpox, measles, pertussis; if one or more of those children contracts a virus and dies or suffers injury, Basham and SERRC bear some share of the responsibility.

For Basham, raising critical questions against a mainstream consensus is an act of intellectual honesty and bravery. If others use the critical questions that we raise in the course of our work in ways that hurt people, we typically do not claim that we are responsible. But the act of washing our hands does not absolve us of responsibility.

### **Human Civilization Is Not (Currently) a Rational Polis**

Basham writes, with the help of my italic emphasis, "It appears this is because they fear the terrified blowback against vaccination in general. But in a *rational polis*, and I contend in large measure we are, as partisans of democracy, this terror of terror is misplaced."

My argument here is against his contention that we are, in large measure, not a rational political society. I argue that we do not, at a society-wide level, have the capacity to be rational enough to discuss the possibility that mistakes in vaccine development caused an immense harm, without that discussion being exploited to spread greater harm.

A rational polis is a society whose people are educated and socialized to respect the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. People in such a society would have, on the whole, three virtues that are the expressions of having cultivated political rationality. I argue that our society is not a rational polis by discussing three virtues that, if they existed prevalently among a population, and its culture and institutions encourage them to grow, would be sufficient conditions to make that society a rational polis. They are not virtues in the philosophically technical sense of the world, because they regard both individual attitudes and beliefs as well as the social infrastructures that nurture them.

These three virtues are not present in sufficient preponderance for human society across the world today to be genuinely rational.

### **Too Many Institutions of Reason Have Become Untrustworthy**

The first virtue of our rational polis that knowledge and discourse would always aim for deeper and more comprehensive truth, as a goal in itself. In practical political terms, this is about how a society's most popular sources of knowledge would inform the public.

In a rational polis, people would learn about the world from properly journalistic sources. The workplace and professional cultures of journalistic businesses and state media would prioritize truth, peace, and public safety. There would be a large number and variety of reliable news sources across all available media. An especially important journalistic institution to keep strong is local news so that people throughout a society can learn truthful information about what affects their communities and immediate circumstances.

Few, if any, news media and journalistic institutions operate this way anymore. Local newspapers have folded in massive numbers in the United States and throughout Western democracies. This is largely due to the disruption of social platforms developing micro-targeting advertisement delivery software. Businesses can now advertise through social platforms at lower cost and more accurately than they ever could through local newspaper and magazine ads. The exodus of wealth and revenues from local journalism has destroyed those organizations.

The quality of public knowledge about current events and their causes could have survived the collapse of commercially sustainable news media if national journalism organizations had maintained journalistic ethics in their practice. However, contemporary news media organizations have few incentives to maintain a commitment to ethical practice and prioritizing truth. The reasons why lie in how ownership of media channels, content producers, and platforms have changed.

So many journalistic institutions have been consolidated under a few owners, that only a few companies direct the general tenor of public news. With news media being one small arm of a larger media conglomerate, their priority is no longer dispassionately informing the public as well as possible. Journalistic institutions are a few parts of a larger assemblage of business holdings, which are arranged to maximize gains for shareholders. That most profitable route for news media is to segment themselves according to dedicated audience demographics.

Media ventures generate revenue by monetizing the attention of people who engage with their content. Moral and political perspective is an extremely effective axis to segment society for marketing the news. The most effective way to engage people is to excite people. While there are many ways to excite people—joy, curiosity, sympathy, shock, schadenfreude—the most effective is rage.

### **Navigating a Public Sphere of Informational Nihilism**

A news network's general political orientation is now part of its brand. The powerful analytic powers of today's social platform companies accelerated public discourse into a field where we most frequently encounter rumour and partisan provocation. Our uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and anger keep us engaging with media organizations whose business incentives encourage presenting genuinely terrifying events in ways that make us more doubtful, worried, afraid, and enraged.

We are not living in a rational polis with such media institutions as conglomerate ownership and the analytic power of social platform software. The affordances of modern mass media, especially now that we must include the exponential proliferation powers of social platforms, will not encourage the calm, sober frame of mind with which we must approach public engagement in a rational polis. If the most effective method of audience engagement is psychological triggering, then a mass media business model that maximizes revenue will bury you in startling distractions.

We cannot be living in a rational polis when the institutions most responsible for informing the public are driven by such incentives. The approach to truth and falsity in our mass media has become a kind of informational nihilism, an indifference to the weaponization of knowledge.

What matters most about any communicated information, for someone with such priorities, is to provoke the receiver to act. Most generally, that act is simply to start or continue paying attention. The information itself acts to capture attention. Its effectiveness at capture does not depend on the information in the communicated content being true or fair-minded. Commercial imperatives in contemporary mass media discourage presenting information in fair-minded or thoughtful ways, because such audience engagement calms instead of excites. Under an attitude of informational nihilism, there need be no limits on how to use information legitimately. Questions of legitimacy do not even make sense if no use of information is forbidden.

### **Falling for Today's Subtler Art of Propaganda**

An intuitive response to our unreliable mass media may be to rely on public universities and research institutions to provide some hopeful measure of corrective. Scientific and university institutions in a rational polis would disinterestedly pursue the truth and guide our communities for the sake of the public welfare and good, in the spirit of that fidelity. Regarding the practice of higher education and research institutions, they work reasonably well.

Regarding their influence on public discourse and our wider political culture, many educational institutions and centres of scientific research are fading from prominence. Analyzing the sources and promoters of major COVID-critical messages and ideas provides an excellent example of how private, conglomerate-owned research centres have crowded out of public discourse the institutions most influential in any rational polis. This recent investigation by journalist Walter Bragman shows the extent to which research institutes and private funding streams to universities are parts of the same business conglomerates for which we seek a corrective. Two of the most prominent such conglomerates are those owned by the DeVos and Koch families.

The COVID policy agenda of these Koch-funded institutions even has a prominent voice on SERRC in Brian Martin. His recent piece "A COVID Paradigm?" uncritically repeats disinformation and lies such as: that COVID is a minor ailment that can be prevented

through good exercise and nutrition; that healthy people do not get seriously ill from COVID; that vitamins, horse dewormer, and malaria medications are effective COVID treatments.

Martin repeats these lies in the spirit of criticism against mainstream institutions of medical and scientific knowledge. He closes his arguments repeating rhetoric that reveals just how thoroughly he has been duped by the propaganda of the Koch family of companies. He argues that a sign of mainstream governments' refusal to engage in critical political action on COVID is that they hold preventing death due to COVID as more important than preventing death and suffering due to climate change. One of the main causes of our civilization's failure to fight and prevent climate change is the influence and lobbying of the Koch family and other powerful oil magnates on the administration and legislatures of governments throughout the world.

Why did so many of our governments hold preventing COVID suffering more important than preventing climate change suffering? Because in the early days of the pandemic, when hospitals were overwhelmed and huge cities like New York and Tehran were digging mass graves for all the dead, we actually saw the danger clearly.

By now, we have experienced a solid two years of propaganda from the same sources as those who have convinced many millions that climate change is a hoax, convincing us that COVID is a hoax. Just as conservative politicians faithfully parrot propaganda about climate change, they now do the same for COVID. That fact is a sign of the power of corporate propaganda to convince us to ignore our material best interests, not some sign that COVID and climate change are not real dangers.

The job of social epistemologists must be more than simply repeating and calling attention to whatever alternative points of view there are to mainstream consensus. It is not enough simply to provide an open forum for whatever ideas float around our society's discourse. That is basically what Joe Rogan does, and we have rather more advanced qualifications. Social epistemologists should be adding more value than this bare minimum to our cultures' conversations.

### **The Growing Marginalization of Scientific Education**

Although this essay has been far from optimistic, social epistemologists, as both educators and researchers, can work individually and in groups and alliances to help a society's population achieve the second and third virtues necessary for a rational polis. The second virtue is that the population is generally well-educated, particularly about scientific knowledge.

I am advocating no dogmatism here, since the social epistemological focus on how knowledge and scientific disciplines develop is a necessary element of scientific knowledge. You cannot understand why a scientific field is as it currently exists without understanding how it developed, what about the world and ourselves it enables us to perceive and

understand, and the limits of how and where it applies. That way, a serious re-evaluation of a discipline's core principles can happen without losing faith in the truth of the discipline itself.

Consider, as an example, the historical reasons why it took so long for so many in the global community of epidemiologists to admit that the COVID virus could spread airborne. For centuries before the discovery of viruses, there was a common belief, especially in Western cultures, that bad smells in the air caused disease. This was the paradigm of miasma. A major element of public education about viruses, once they were decently understood in the early twentieth century, required beating back any idea in popular culture that stank of miasma theory. Airborne viral transmission sounded too much like the old superstitions of “bad air!” and within a couple of generations, avoiding droplet spread like sneezes and contaminated surfaces was a mainstream premise of disease prevention. A new normal developed from a reactive overcompensation, and the reaction itself was forgotten.

By teaching about such histories and the means by which knowledge adjusts and can improve with changes in context, application, and related new discoveries, social epistemologists can improve the nuance and thoughtfulness of public knowledge about knowledge itself. However, none of this is happening, since such nuanced education about the nature of knowledge is largely restricted to university-level classes in specific programs.

Very few students in more practically-focused programs like business, applied sciences and engineering, or the trades ever encounter the ideas of our discipline in a serious way. The growing costs of education and the necessity for more people to finance education through debt disincentivize investing money in courses and programs without obvious job market application. In the lower levels of public education, secondary and elementary schools face constant pressure to cut budgets and streamline students to job market preparation instead of career development. Many countries, such as the United States, also permit religious school networks to supplant comprehensive education, even receiving state funding to design curriculums around dogmatic principles.

### **Public Conscience Has Become Delusional and Hostile**

This fraying of education institutions prevents the population from developing the third and most fundamental virtue of a rational polis: widespread agreement on how to discuss, debate, and change course on matters of knowledge, science, and the common good. Such collegiality is negligible in much contemporary discourse throughout human civilization. Frames of reference like that are usually so general as to be laughable,<sup>1</sup> but global human civilization is the scale at which the social platforms operate, as they mediate almost all our mass-level social engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> What teacher hasn't joked about the pretentious first-year paper introduction, “Since the beginning of time...”

Now is a unique period in human history. A single business model, the social platform, first developed in a single concentrated industry, Silicon Valley and the wider US software sector, dominates the entire world's mass media. For the only time so far in human history, a single professional culture incubated a single mass communication framework that all people throughout the Earth share.<sup>2</sup> That cultural heritage has taken societies throughout Earth farther from any ideal of a rational polis.

Much of contemporary culture has been deeply influenced by the discourse norms of online communities that promote simplified, fundamentalist conceptions of reason and rationality that revolve around contests of debate. These communities are highly misogynist, and their discourse style is bullying, trolling, and provocation.<sup>3</sup> They hypocritically claim that they are “just asking questions” and “being rational” when they define rationality in terms that dismiss complexity, the possibility of multiple true perspectives on the world, and does not even conceive of causality as anything more complicated than direct causation and intentional acts.

These communities have embraced informational nihilism. Victory in argument is claimed as the proof of a claim's truth, which is reasonable to consider of a rational polis. But the means of argument developed in internet forums and among the software industry is aggressively attacking opponents. All manner of trolling, gaslighting, insults, and psychological triggering is considered acceptable means of argument. Logical fallacies that elementary logic classes dismantle and dismiss are embraced precisely because they are quick and dirty ways to smear your opponents. Attempts to point out the logical flaws of an argument do not earn thoughtful self-criticism, but increasingly abusive responses as the aggressor refuses to admit that they are wrong. Having refused to concede, they declare you destroyed in debate.

If we lived in a rational polis, the following conditions would apply. Our public discourse and related dominant institutions would generally aim toward the truth. Our institutions of knowledge and education would include comprehensive learning about science and how science works and develops. We would debate each other in a friendly spirit of impartial truth seeking and mutual respect. None of these conditions apply.

Initiatives like Basham's critically investigate and examine confirmation bias and institutional corruption in scientific institutions to uncover corporate crimes against humanity of negligent harm. These are valuable investigations because they seek to reform and change institutions and governance to bring us closer in line with justice. But our current cultural and institutional conditions are such that these works will instead be weaponized by authoritarian and violent actors to harm and dominate vulnerable people.

## **The Price of Collective Denial Has No Ceiling**

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<sup>2</sup> Airoidi, Massimo. 2022. *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms*. Polity Press.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, Whitney; Ryan M. Milner. 2021. *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*. MIT Press.

The notion that HIV did develop as an accidental by-product of human bio-technological mistakes makes sense on a basic level of sober thought. Monkey has been part of the diet of communities in rural Congo for thousands of years. If the ordinary consumption of monkey in rural central Africa was the only cause of HIV's genesis, then it is more likely to have happened long before the twentieth century. Since the emergence of HIV was an extraordinary event, it would make more sense for its origin to include some relatively extraordinary intervention.

However, a more recent example may temper our enthusiasm for just how strange an intervention into nature must be to create a viral catastrophe. The ongoing COVID pandemic also emerged from extraordinary intervention, but it was a much less ominous narrative than Hooper's account of the CHAT polio vaccine's epidemiological malpractice. COVID emerged from the urban sprawl of small-town China: human settlement in previously isolated areas exposed people to bat populations that carried coronaviruses we had never encountered before. Such viruses have been migrating into human populations in that region of the world for about thirty years, and have caused several dangerous epidemics in China, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Canada, among other places.

A calamity does not require an origin in such perversely romantic narratives as a conspiracy ensnaring us in the machinations of the corporate pharmaceutical industry. We are an ecologically stupid civilization, whose scientific knowledge has only recently begun to understand how catastrophically our industrial technology and economic system has wrecked the natural processes that make Earth hospitable for us. When the last human dies, it will not be because of some nefarious conspiracy, but because of our own blindness, greed, and willingness to embrace comfortable delusions and lies over difficult truths.

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